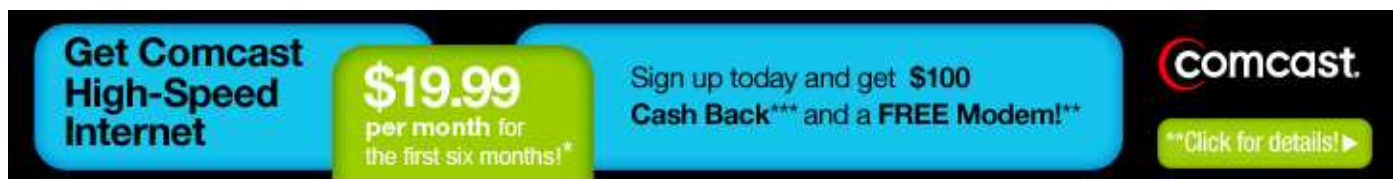


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Politics, bugs slow tsunami alarm system

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Posted 7/30/2006 4:33 PM ET

By Michael Casey, Associated Press

BANGKOK, Thailand — Within weeks of the devastating 2004 quake and tsunami, governments across the Indian Ocean vowed to establish a warning system that would protect their coastal residents from another disaster.

But progress has been slowed by bickering over which country should host a regional tsunami alert center and technical problems with deep-sea monitoring buoys.

Governments also have come under fire for failing to educate citizens about the threat of killer waves, bolster coastal infrastructure, and establish ways to pass along warnings to remote villages — something that cost Indonesia hundreds of lives just two weeks ago.

On Monday, more than 150 regional officials, aid workers and donors gather on Indonesia's resort island of Bali to discuss the \$126 million (euro100 million) [Indian Ocean Tsunami Warning and Mitigation System](#).

They hope to come away from the U.N. meeting with a timeline for implementing the network — at least two years away — and detailed plans from the 27 affected countries for disseminating alerts and evacuating the public.

The July 17 tsunami that killed 600 people on the Indonesian island of Java adds a sense of urgency to the three-day conference.

Two regional agencies issued bulletins warning that a powerful earthquake could spawn destructive waves, but Indonesian officials did not pass them on to local communities in time. And with no sirens on the beaches, it would have been difficult to alert the public even if they had.

"We have the information but now we have to make sure that information is fully available to the people at risk," said Patricio Bernal, the director of the U.N.'s Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission.

But, he noted, many positive things have happened in the last 18 months.

There are now 23 monitoring stations across the Indian Ocean that can quickly measure the strength of underwater quakes and assess the tsunami threat.

That information is sent to the Hawaii-based Pacific Tsunami Warning Center and the Japanese Meteorological Agency, which then relay it to individual countries at risk.

Progress on a nation-by-nation basis, however, has been inconsistent.

Some — most notably Thailand, Malaysia and India — have set up tsunami warning centers to field information, and Australia also plans one. Thailand has also installed an alert system along the Andaman Coast, complete with sirens and evacuation routes.

Indonesia, on the other hand, is still struggling to set up dozens of tidal gauges, seismometers and deep-ocean tsunami monitoring buoys, despite help from the Germans.

While it has said the system will be up and running by mid-2008, only two of 22 buoys have been installed — and they are under repair after

breaking from their moorings. The government only announced plans Friday to build elevated safety zones along the coast and held evacuation drills in two towns across its 6,000 inhabited islands.

The immediate challenge for most of the region, though, is agreeing on who should assess data and determine when to issue a tsunami warning. Eight countries want to set up their own centers, something experts say could pave the way for unnecessary confusion.

"If you have eight different pieces of information going to all the 27 countries and contrasting with one another, then nobody knows what to do," said Curt Barrett, of the U.S. [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#).

Other potential pitfalls include a shortage of the deep-sea buoys — since there are only a handful of suppliers worldwide — and financing the maintenance of the system over the long-term.

Time, too, remains a hurdle. While countries like Sri Lanka and the Maldives may have hours to prepare for an alert, some parts of Indonesia would have minutes — a situation that Bernal described as a "huge challenge."

Take the town of Padang off the coast of Sumatra. Kerry Sieh, a California Institute of Technology seismologist, has forecast that it will be hit by a massive earthquake in the next 30 years that will spawn waves up to 12 meters (39 feet) high.

With less than a half hour to escape, Sieh and others said a high-tech warning system will do little good. What could save residents, he said, is simply learning where and when to run when the quake hits and having the necessary escape routes to flee.

"Here are a million people along the Sumatran coast. You are giving them a warning that will do them no good," Sieh said. "If they have been educated, if there is emergency response prepared and the infrastructure has been changed a bit, they will have taken care of the issue.

"They will run if they can."

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